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ABSTRACT

Single, elderly, childless women are a specialized population needing social support. To examine the association between life satisfaction and social support among this population, 65 women (30 widowed, 35 never-married) were interviewed and completed the Life Satisfaction Scale. An analysis of the results showed that the never-married sample had significantly greater life satisfaction than their widowed counterparts. The never-married women were more able to give and receive assistance in concrete crisis situations than the widowed women. The never-married group also was oriented more to the present than the widowed group. The remainder of this paper focuses first on a discussion of the relationship of the research findings to a role theory perspective and its effects on clients' thinking and behavior. Second, a short overview of some of the reasons that groups are thought to be an effective means of intervention is presented. Third, these factors are tied into a model format of group intervention, a way of most effectively reaching this client group. The major issues to be addressed in a group and some of the situational factors such as time, place, and composition, are discussed. (BL)

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SUPPORT GROUPS FOR A SPECIALIZED POPULATION - SINGLE, ELDERLY, CHILDLESS WOMEN

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This presentation involves three different parts, which will, as a whole, give us the opportunity to explore ways of dealing effectively with a specific population - namely, single, elderly, childless women. First, a brief summary of research with a group of 65 single, elderly, childless women will be presented, along with some of the conclusions drawn, and issues that were important to them as identified by them. The relationship of the findings to a role theory perspective is discussed in terms of its effect on clients thinking and behavior. Secondly, a short overview of some of the reasons that groups are thought to be an effective means of intervention will be discussed. Thirdly, these factors will be tied into a model format of group intervention, as ways of most effectively reaching the client group. This includes discussing the major issues to be addressed in a group, and some of the situational factors such as time, place, composition, etc. My hope is that participants will share their experiences with intervention, so that theory can be combined with practice to better plan for the groups of clients that you work with.

Research Study and Conclusions

Sixty-five single childless women, over the age of 65, from Los Angeles were interviewed in a 90 minute face-to-face interview. Four types of sources were used to obtain the sample including senior centers, a senior apartment complex, an organization for retired people, and referrals from individual colleagues. In all four situations, additional respondents were obtained through the "snowball" effect of one respondent referring the researcher to others. Guidelines for protecting the right of human subjects were observed at all times.

This was a purposive sample, in that no attempt was made to stratify the respondents, aside from assuring at least 30 each of women who were never married, and 30 who were widowed.

The major question of this study asked about the association between life satisfaction and four different types of social support. (See Table 1)

1) The presence or absence of a confidante in one's life. A "confidante relationship is defined as an on-going relationship in which one is able to discuss intimate, personal problems or troubles; someone with whom one is free enough to allow one's weaknesses to be displayed (Brown, 1978). Presence of a confidante was significantly related ($p < .05$) to life satisfaction, as well as specifically having someone to tell one's troubles to ($p < .02$). For both groups, having a confidante was important but the difference was more drastic for the widowed group. The never-married scores drop by 1.65 with the absence of a confidante, while the widowed mean scores drop by 2.44.

2) A measure of the number and kinds of contacts that respondents report in their daily lives. This includes both raw numbers, and the purposes of contacts made. A distinction was made as to whether contacts were primarily concerned with doing business with someone, such as seeing the grocer about one's bill, or a friend regarding the time and place they would meet, or whether it reflected social support, such as discussing feelings, or problems, or entertaining each other. For the total sample, the number of personal visits ($p < .017$), as well as the number of overall contacts ($p < .02$) was significantly related to life satisfaction. For widows, life satisfaction rises as numbers of contacts increase. The difference in mean life satisfaction scores for the never-married with six or more personal visits, and the never-married with 0-1 personal visits is 2.5. For the widowed group, the same difference is 3.2.

3) The facility and extent to which individuals are able to rely on others in times of crisis, using one person as a specific example.

4) The reciprocity of interactions between individuals. For the third and fourth measures, three specific situations were examined (lending/receiving a large amount of money, putting someone up/staying with someone for an indefinite period of time, risking personal danger/allowing someone to risk personal danger for respondent) as to the probability of that situation occurring.

The results showed that for both widows and never-married respondents, the situation that people were most likely to ask for help in was to be given temporary lodging for an indefinite period of time (73.3%). Respondents are reluctant to ask someone to risk personal danger for them (76.9%). The only significant difference between the never-married and widowed responses in this area was the frequency with which they would ask for temporary lodging, with the never-married group being more likely to be willing to ask (Lambda, $p < .02$). For the total sample and both sub-samples, respondents are quite willing to assist some other person in all three situations. For the total sample the percentages are 84.6% that are willing to loan money, 78.5% that are willing to risk personal danger for others, and 87.7% who are willing to provide temporary lodging. For the never-married group, the percentages are 90.0%, 76.7%, and 93.3% respectively, and for the widowed group, the percentage is 80.0% for all three situations. The never-married have a higher absolute reciprocity score (Lambda, $p < .001$).

To measure life satisfaction, the Life Satisfaction Scale was used (Neugarten, et. al., 1961) in both its closed and open ended versions. The LSI-Z is an 18 item questionnaire on which each item has three possible

answers (one positive, one negative, and one expressing ambivalence). An overall score ranging from 0-18 is computed. In addition, the LSI-B, measuring the same qualities, consists of 12 open-ended questions, which are again scored as to whether they are generally positive, negative, or neutral. The responses to these questions are a further indicator of life satisfaction for the respondents. The total scores have a possible range of 0-18, and the respondents answers had a range of 13 (scores ranged from 4-17), with a mean of 11.54, a median of 11.69, and a bi-modal distribution at 11.0 and 14.0. This approximates a normal distribution. A t-test showed that the never-married group reported significantly higher (Mean = 12.1) scores than the widowed group (Mean = 10.83), p=.01. This finding suggests that never-married and widowed respondents have found different coping mechanisms for dealing with their lack of traditional roles which will be discussed.

The data was analyzed by means of a variety of statistical techniques. T-tests were used to compare life satisfaction scores with scores relating to presence or absence of a confidante, and facility and reciprocity of relying on others in times of crisis. The Pearson r statistic examined the relationship of life satisfaction scores to numbers and kinds of contacts in respondents lives. Lambda and chi square tests were used to examine the differences between responses of never-married and widowed respondents. Lastly, multiple regression techniques were used to determine which of the four types of social support examined were more strongly associated with life satisfaction than others. The open ended questions were examined and categorized for discussion, and checked for reliability by another person.

Demographically, the total sample was predominately Caucasian (95.4%), with a mean age of 73.7, reporting good or excellent health, well-educated (some college or better), of social class II-III in a five point scale (Hollingshead and Redlich, 1957) and lived independently in apartments or private homes. The never-married and widowed groups did vary in many respects, particularly in the areas of age, education, social class, and living arrangements.

Relationship to Role Theory

The interactionist perspective of role theory stresses the flexibility with which individuals can affect the social structure of their lives, and create informal as well as formal roles (George, 1980). The sample in this study were people who did not, at the present time, have the three major roles in our society - wife, mother, worker. The question of whether and how new roles can be created and or undertaken becomes relevant. People develop high or low evaluations of themselves, in regard to role adequacy, role reciprocity, and self-conception through the performance of roles. Successful role adaptation, and high life satisfaction will be associated with a high evaluation, degree of role adequacy, degree of role reciprocity, and self-conception. Unsuccessful role adaptations, and low life satisfaction will be associated with low evaluation, degree of role adequacy, role reciprocity, and self-conception.

This paradigm is supported to some degree by the findings in this study. The never-married sample had significantly higher amounts of life satisfaction than their widowed counterparts. One might postulate that they have been more successful at creating substitute roles, because they have done it all their lives. On the other hand, those unable to adapt may be reacting to the issue of change rather than the inability to create roles.

The widows, because they have defined themselves for so long in terms of their husbands, saw themselves as inadequate in roles at the present time, which left them with a low self-concept. For example, one widow said, "My husband was everything. I helped him, and loved him, and now I have nothing to do". This was after 13 years of living alone and seemed to exemplify the attitudes of those with low life satisfaction; that they had not been able to create new roles after the death of their spouse.

On the other hand, those who saw themselves in positive terms talked of the satisfaction they had gotten from their careers. For example, one woman said, "I've made a name for myself, and have an incredible sense of freedom. I can do what I want, and when I want to do it, and don't have to care what others think. My career was my family, but without the ties that prevent you from having freedom".

A feeling of role reciprocity, and a high self-concept can be associated, according to this paradigm, with the ability to rely on others in crisis, and the reciprocity of interactions that one has. This too, is borne out by the findings. Although neither of these measures of social support was significantly related to life satisfaction alone, the never-married group (who had higher life satisfaction) were more able to give and receive assistance in concrete crisis situations, such as asking and providing for temporary lodging, and lending money. The ability to give and receive assistance lends credence to the feeling that one is involved in roles with other people.

In discussing the ability to either create, or substitute roles, we should first look at the situation of the aged in general, to understand the contextual frustrations within which both the never-married and widowed

groups are operating. Looking at the life satisfaction measures used in this study, the data can be compared to scores of the general public, taken from an extensive national survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates. Their study proposed to examine the "Myth and Reality of Aging in America" and studied both a general sample, and a subsample over 65. They utilized the same 18 item LSI-Z scale, and found a mean score of 13.35 for the general public (ages 18-64), and a mean score of 12.2 for their subsample over 65. This reflects the fact that, although small, life satisfaction does diminish with age. For the present study, the mean score for the entire sample was 11.54.

In the present study, comments were made that expressed frustration with the aging process in general. For example, one woman said, "It's worse when you get older because life gets harder - the pace gets too fast. It's frustrating to me because I can't keep up with the clerks in the supermarket".

However, after taking into account the frustrations of aging, the data distinctly supports the notion that different factors are operating for the never-married and widowed subsamples. On three out of the eighteen statements dealing with life satisfaction, the responses of the two groups significantly differ from each other. The three statements included:

1. This is the dreariest time of my life.
2. Most of the things I do are boring or monotonous.
3. Compared to other people my age, I get down in the dumps too often.

In all 3 cases, widowed respondents were in agreement a significantly higher percentage of time than were never-married respondents.

These findings begin to paint a picture of the widowed group feeling

that life has gotten considerably worse as time has passed. For many, individual comments suggested the reason had to do with an inability to accept the death of their husband, and the need to fashion a new life for themselves. For example, one widow said, "The absolute worst is the loneliness. My husband's been gone for 18 years, and I still miss him every day". And from another widow, "When you're alone, you have to make decisions for yourself. It's the little things - like I want to go to the theater, but want someone else to pick up the tickets. That was different when my husband was alive. Now I feel I'd do more if someone else was there to take the initiative". And yet another, "I have a beautiful apartment, and no one to share it with anymore".

This ties into their feelings about regrets about the past, in, for example, their not having had children. For example, one woman felt, "It would have been different. I wouldn't feel as lonely as I do today if I'd had children. I could depend on their being around me". And, from one 72-year old widow, "What's most important to me is to find a way to remarry and have a family".

The never-married group, while also having their regrets about things in the past seem to have come to terms with their life, and the choices they have made. They put their energy into the present, and attempted not to dwell on the things they had not gotten. For example, "I'm an enthusiast and an optimist - so I enjoy lots of things. I'm not big on looking back - I just make decisions, and live with them". In reference to not having had a marriage or a child, one never-married woman expressed, "I'm not sorry. I know I never had the gladness or the sadness. Now I see friends who have had kids and they're far away, so my friends are unhappy. Anyway, being alone is better than a bad marriage".

However, an alternate explanation for this difference might be that the choice was less clear-cut for the widows, and therefore the consequences were more poignant. For women of that era, it was almost impossible for the never-married to have been able to raise a child, so they were, perhaps, able to more simply put that choice from their minds, and pursue other options.

One gathers a sense of pride from the never-married group in having been able to succeed independently. One comment was, "I'm proud of the fact that I managed on my own without getting help. And I haven't allowed myself to become a bitter person. I'm a fighter". Another comment was, "I'm glad for how adaptive I've been. I'm sure I can handle whatever comes up for me to handle".

There were a variety of reasons for women not having children; some made a conscious choice, and some did not. The ones, again, that have come to terms with their choices are more able to enjoy the present joys in their lives. One widow, whose life satisfaction score was high, said, "I didn't have children because they would have been used as gunpowder. I went through World War I, and wanted no part of World War II". This was a difficult choice for her to make, but once made, she was able to go on with her life.

Those who were unable to resolve their ambivalence about their marital and childless status had a harder time. For example, some widows seemed more likely to feel that they had missed out. The ones that did not substitute other goals appeared to feel the loneliness the most acutely. For example, "Of course I regret not having had kids - anyone who sees a happy mother regrets it. Everyone has maternal instincts". Another

comment was, "I feel lonely when its a 'family' holiday and I'm alone - they (referring to nieces and nephews) forget I exist all the time". In general, the never-married have, in a way had an easier task, since they have been practicing the skill of role creation all of their lives. Their lives have been more stable, and they have not had to adjust to a major change in life circumstances, as did the widows. In general, the things that distinguish higher life satisfaction from lower life satisfaction are related to the amount that people feel enmeshed in other roles. Since they have had so much practice, the never-married seem better able to have accepted the choices available to them. Erikson (1950) in his discussion of the eight stages of man refers to ego integrity versus despair as the last stage needing to be resolved in one's lifetime. Erikson described ego integrity as:

> "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions.... Although aware of all the various life style which have given meaning to human striving, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life against all threats" (pg. 268).

Why Are Groups Effective?

After identifying some of the primary and specific needs of single, elderly, childless women, we can now turn to an examination of the kinds of group interaction that are most likely to meet those needs. First, it is important to understand why groups are expected to effect change, and why it is, in some cases, the preferred modality of intervention. Yalom (1975) identifies twelve "curative" factors in groups that can serve as an explanation for the effectiveness of group intervention.

Altruism refers to the feeling of satisfaction received through the

intrinsic act of giving. Coming to a sense of having something of value to offer others can raise people's self-esteem and validate their existence. Yalom describes an old Hasidic story to demonstrate the benefits of altruism:

> There is an old Hasidic story of the Rabbi who had a conversation with the Lord about Heaven and Hell. "I will show you Hell," said the Lord and led the Rabbi into a room in the middle of which was a very big, round table. The people sitting as it were famished and desperate. In the middle of the table there was a large pot of stew, enough and more for everyone. The smell of the stew was delicious and made the Rabbi's mouth water. The people round the table were holding spoons with very long handles. Each one found that it was just possible to reach the pot to take a spoonful of the stew, but because the handle of his spoon was longer than a man s arm, he could not get the food back into his mouth. The Rabbi saw that their suffering was terrible. "Now I will show you Heaven," said the Lord, and they went into another room, exactly the same as the first. There was the same big, round table and the same pot of stew. The people, as before, were equipped with the same long-handled spoons - but here they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. At first the Rabbi could not understand. "It is simple, but it requires a certain skill," said the Lord. "You see, they have learned to feed each other."

Group cohesiveness deals with the sense of "we-ness" that a group comes to feel about each other. Long after a group disbands, members remember the basic acceptance they had in a cohesive group, and again feel as though they belong.

Universality refers to the sense that others have had the same kinds of experiences and can be identified with. Although we shudder to think that the cliche of "misery loves company" holds truth, there is a sense of comfort in knowing that one is not the first to struggle through whatever experiences are giving them difficulty.

Interpersonal learning (input and output) refers to the growing awareness of the relationship between oneself and others. Clients in groups become more aware of the kinds of impressions they make on others, how they come across to others, and the mannerisms and habits they have that affect other people. They also have a chance to improve interpersonal skills, and to examine how they relate to other people, and how they can approach other people in new and more effective ways.

Guidance refers to the opportunity to receive concrete definite suggestions about a particular problem in a non-threatening format. Because of the "group experience", guidance is not experienced as condescending, but rather as a mutual sharing of wisdom and experience.

Catharsis refers to the opportunity to rant and rave in a safe setting. Especially for those dealing with problems over which they have no control (such as chronic physical illnesses), it can be beneficial just to "complain" and to receive validation that one's feelings are "normal" and/or "acceptable". Catharsis alone, of course, will not change the situation, but it can be an important first step towards accepting a situation so that it can be dealt with in a more effective (less destructive) way.

Identification refers to finding people that one can use as role models in specific or general kinds of situations. This type of experience is one that promotes self-acceptance and effective coping with difficult situations. It is, of course, closely related to universality, since it enhances clients' feelings that they are not, in fact, alone.

Family reenactment refers to a sense of understanding one's own family of origin by seeing how others relate to each other. Groups can also provide a "corrective" experience by giving clients' a sense of acceptance

that they might not have received in their own family. For the women we are considering, many of them felt that their families perceived them as failures, and group settings can be the chance to resolve those feelings permanently and effectively.

Insight, or self-understanding refers to the sense that the clients' own reactions are sometimes irrational or unrealistic. For example, many single, childless women feel that others are reacting to them with pity, even when that may not be the case. An increased understanding of one's own fears, hopes, etc., can affect present-day interactions with other people in a positive way.

Installation of hope involves coming to the realization that there is a future, and that clients' can have a measure of autonomy over that future. The feeling comes from seeing other people resolving problems similar to one's own problems, and seeing the resultant improved functioning, for those other people.

Existential factors deals with coming to a recognition that life is unfair at times, that ultimately there is not escape from some pain, and that ultimately people face life individually. Facing these kinds of feelings is something that enables clients to move on, rather than expending their energy in avoiding them.

A Model Format

If in fact, we are dealing with issues of role creation and role substitution, it seems important to offer the opportunity to learn skills in these areas. This opportunity would encourage more successful adaptation to one's own life style, by facilitating flexibility in dealing with all of the situational and emotional changes of later life.

One possible format is as follows:

Each group could consist of eight to ten women, living within a two square mile enclave, who would meet within that enclave as well. These groups would be formed with the assistance of local agencies dealing with senior citizens or within a senior center itself. The content of the group would be focused on five major areas (those identified in the research just discussed), all contributing to a more independent and satisfying mode of living. These five areas are developing confidante relationships, facilitating resolution of health problems, developing transportation alternatives, creating networks for times of crisis, and encouraging reciprocity in relationships. Together, these five goals could be expected to meet the needs of those who have accepted their childlessness and singlehood as a way of life and allow them to strengthen their modes of acceptance. They would reinforce those who have coped well in the past and who could provide a role model for those who have more difficulty.

Firstly, the development of a confidante relationship would be facilitated by the weekly meeting together around more concrete issues. Hopefully, the participants would form relationships that would continue beyond the ten week period and continue to use the "independent living coping mechanism" created within

the group. The homogeneity of the group would greatly increase the chances for such relationships.

Secondly, the resolution of minor health problems would be addressed. Issues of nutrition, preventive care, as specifically related to living alone, would be focused on. For example, nutrition has played a large part in retention of health; yet there are specific difficulties related to the preparation, buying and motivation for cooking for one. Solutions to these difficulties and sharing of meals could both be encouraged as a way to improve health. The same holds true for exercise. Older people deteriorate when they do not use their bodies, yet more people have difficulty motivating themselves to do so alone. Both of these could be addressed with the promotion of "doing together" because of the very limited geographical distribution of the group. Senior centers generally encompass such a wide range of neighborhoods that people who do meet cannot continue their relationships. Preliminary data has confirmed that people associate with those geographically close, and this type of group would provide such an opportunity.

This third issue of transportation would be addressed in other ways also. Many people are uncomfortable

driving alone, and having the chance to start a journey with a companion would promote further usage of various community resources and interests. Again, out of necessity, the majority of women living alone without children retain their capacity to drive, despite the increase of fear and trepidation. Discussion of this issue would lessen the fear and provide realistic alternatives.

Creating networks for times of crisis and encouraging reciprocity in relationships are intertwined, as the reality is that people are hesitant to ask for help in times of crisis if they see the nature of the relationship as one-way. The virtue of independence is often carried too far, because of the inability to strike a balance. Discussion of this issue could promote more realistic reaching out in times of need and a further awareness of the ways one can reciprocate. This theme would be made feasible by the homogeneity of the group since in that specific setting the participants would not feel the societal pressures of labeling their childlessness and singlehood as something derogatory. A training curriculum composed of these five central themes would perhaps lead to an enhanced ability to live independently in qualitatively more satisfying ways. The concept of self-help; having the participants decide for themselves the ways to resolve

the difficulties that occur, does more than solve specific problems. It promotes a mode of thinking and dealing with life that is invaluable in later years, as more and more concrete problematic issues emerge.

Some of the situational factors in a group that need to be considered deal with time, length, composition of group, etc. The selection of ten weeks as a possible duration of group life speaks to the need of balance between a plan that is long enough to actually foster the desired relationships, and yet time-limited enough so that the primary goal of enhancing informal support systems is not lost. An indefinite group might inadvertently tie in any perceived satisfaction with the formal experience which discourage later informal kinds of involvement with group members.

The homogeneity of the group in terms of marital status, and childlessness, as discussed previously, would allow for a comfortableness in relating that would generate free and easy discussion, and growth of a group atmosphere that allows change to take place.

In summary, these are some ideas about elements that would foster the creation of informal support groups. Hopefully, by combining our experience, and intuition and judgment about the clients we serve, the most effective kind of interventions will be planned.

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TABLE 1

QUESTIONS USED TO MEASURE SOCIAL SUPPORT

Presence or Absence of A Confidante

1. If you had a problem of some sort, who would be the first person that you would want to discuss it with? _____

   (If respondent cannot say, a probe is added; i.e. "What about....any friends, or relatives?")

2. Is this person someone that you feel you could tell anything to?

3. Is this person someone that you feel you could tell about most of the troubles you have?

Adapted from Brown,1978

Number and Kinds of Contacts

1. I'd like to ask you some questions about whom you've seen in the past week. I know it may be hard to remember, but I'd like to try and go back with you, day by day, and talk about whom you've had contact with - either in person, or by telephone: Let's start with today, and go backwards:

   Person's Name Telephone/Visit Reason For Contact

Adapted from Leichter,1967.

Facility and Extent With Which Individuals Are Able To Rely On Others In Times Of Crisis

1. Is there anyone that you would ask for the loan of a sizeable amount of money if you were in serious need, and he/she had it to spare?

2. Is there anyone that you would ask to risk personal danger to help you out of a tight spot?

3. Is there anyone that you would ask to put you up for an indefinite period of time if you were put out of your apartment and had nowhere to stay?

(For all three questions, the choices are Absolutely, Probably, Probably Not, and Definitely Not)

Adapted from Brim,1974.

Reciprocity of Interactions

1. For the same person discussed above, how likely is it that you would loan him/her a sizeable amount of money if he/she were in serious need and you had it to spare?

2. For the same person discussed above, how likely is it that you would risk personal danger for him/her to help them out of a tight spot?

3. For the same person discussed above, how likely is it that you would put him/her up for an indefinite period of time if he/she were put out of his/her apartment and had nowhere to stay?

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1. Is there anyone that you would ask for the loan of a sizeable amount of money if you were in serious need, and he/she had it to spare?

2. Is there anyone that you would ask to risk personal danger to help you out of a tight spot?

3. Is there anyone that you would ask to put you up for an indefinite period of time if you were put out of your apartment and had nowhere to stay?

(For all three questions, the choices are Absolutely, Probably, Probably Not, and Definitely Not)

Adapted from Brim,1974.

Reciprocity of Interactions

1. For the same person discussed above, how likely is it that you would loan him/her a sizeable amount of money if he/she were in serious need and you had it to spare?

2. For the same person discussed above, how likely is it that you would risk personal danger for him/her to help them out of a tight spot?

3. For the same person discussed above, how likely is it that you would put him/her up for an indefinite period of time if he/she were put out of his/her apartment and had nowhere to stay?

(For all three questions, the choices are Absolutely, Probably, Probably Not, and Definitely Not)

Adapted from Brim, 1974.